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Rules Are Not Meant To Be Broken: The Interpretation of Societal Norms and Rules in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

In Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, rules are not meant to be broken and those who do break them will either perish or end up in a worse position than before. Opposed to the common phrase, rules are meant to be broke, Kesey portrays through his fictitious novel that rules are not meant to be broken. This ideology is also supported by societal norms, something Kesey agrees to very much. Through his novel he states that rules are meant to be followed and that there are no exceptions. Throughout Kesey's novel, characters who break rules seem to be rewarded or gain a sense of pride. This applies in the real world as well, those who break rules will gain temporary happiness and fulfilment, however this is short lived. Much similar to modern day society, those who break the rules in the novel will be punished accordingly, and will be in worse position than before. Also, those who follow rules and norms are viewed as those who are neither punished or defeated. Kesey portrays these scenarios in his novel with the use of various characters, who show the same path, from breaking rules to fulfillment to suffering. By presenting a world where characters who break rules receive temporary fulfillment, but eventual justice, Kesey illustrates that breaking rules will not sustain long-term fulfillment, and that society's rules are meant to be followed since provide order.

In attempts to simulate reality, Kesey chose to show that the characters who break rules or societies norms are praised and presented as the leaders. At first Kesey establishes fear from the patient towards Nurse Ratched in efforts to show how policies enforce superiority. She is also generally referred to as a representative of societal norms or the Combine. Harding states that Nurse Ratched “eventually gets inside everyone” (Kesey 73). By this Harding is stating that Nurse Ratched values each patient and learns their unique characters to further improve her treatment techniques. Furthermore, Harding states that McMurphy will be safe “as long as [he keeps] control” (73). This is another statement that proves that Nurse Ratched has her patients under control and that they understand to be safe they must follow rules and norms. Since the Nurse is not breaking any norms or rules but upholding them, she is neither punished or seen as defeated. In many instances Kesey presents what seems to be meaningless rules established by Nurse Ratched, and are viewed by the patients as a symbol of authority. Many patients viewed the strict time schedule, the rationing of the cigarettes, and the limit to only one room for both acutes and chronics as a display of total control. However these rules were not a symbol of authority, but necessary expectations set to keep order, which allows Nurse Ratched to do her job. Kesey shows that the rules begin to diminish as McMurphy was introduced. Kesey portrays McMurphy as someone who “[slipped] the collar” and never let “the combine [have] a chance to install anything” (92). This portrayal shows a character who is not affected by societal norms. At first McMurphy is seen to provide hope and was the only character to protest rules. His judgment was influential to others, including Bromden. Many followed his lead and began to break the rules. McMurphy started a veto to change the television time to the afternoon and in this process he got many patients to break their usual cycle and conform under his rule. However he did not value any patients, he just used them as pawns in his chess game against Nurse Ratched. He even addressed the older patients

as “those old birds” which shows his lack of care for his peers (140). The situation at this point seemed to be hopeful and seemed that this rebellious attitude brought happiness and joy. The patients seem to be enjoying their new freedom, however this is short lived.

As society dictates, those who break rules will be punished. Following Kesey’s parallelism to society the men of the ward face severe punishments. Kesey showed how McMurphy was viewed as a hero, and who in essence freed the patients from their misery. However in truth, McMurphy was a criminal, who was accused of rape. McMurphy’s prior criminal acts caught up to him and he was punished for all the wrongdoings he committed. He tried to escape these charges by using the mental hospital as an escape. He manipulated the men of the ward and sought to be the leader. When Billy was caught with Candy he screamed “McMurphy! He did it” (315). Instead of saying McMurphy made Billy do it, Kesey emphasized that McMurphy is the one who influenced everyone else to break the rules. Chief Bromden agreed that he “couldn’t stop him because [he] was the ones making him do it” (318). This shows how manipulated the patients were, and how they believed that breaking rules will grant them freedom. His final mistake was a direct attack on Nurse Ratched, a symbol to all rules and societal norms, for which he receives a lobotomy putting him in a vegetative state. This is Kesey’s way of portraying what happens to those who break rules. In addition, Kesey chooses to have the character Billy kill himself to further prove that breaking the rules will have consequences. Billy followed the lead of McMurphy like many other patients in the ward. Billy even felt remorse after sleeping with Candy, he felt bad and pleaded with Nurse Ratched not to tell his mother of his mistakes. However once Nurse Ratched refused, Billy was not able to handle the guilt and the responsibility and resorted to suicide to escape from his mistakes. This is another portrayal of punishment after one break rules. Even those who seem to escape from the punishments, will face the consequences due no matter what.

In addition to punishments, one who breaks rules also ends up in the same place or even worse. It is mentioned by Chief Bromden in the beginning of the novel that patients who go AWOL are not worth looking for. He said that they will end up back to the ward themselves. This shows how that those who break the rules in the ward and attempt to escape will not be able to sustain themselves outside the ward. It shows how defying the rules will return you to the same status and will not provide sustained happiness. This idea of returning back to the ward after escaping closely relates to Chief Bromden. Toward the end, Kesey includes the escape of Chief Bromden and shows how he is free. However the novel begins with Chief Bromden in the medical ward, explaining what happened. In addition, Chief uses breaks the control panel in his escape, and in the opening scene Nurse Ratched is seen carrying a “bag full of [...] wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter” (4). These parts are not symbols, they are tools necessary to fix the control panel broken during Bromden’s failed attempt to escape. Kesey showed how Chief Bromden broke the rules and escaped, however Kesey also showed how Chief was punished by introducing Bromden in the setting of the Ward. Kesey portrays that under no circumstances are rules meant to be broken, and those who defy rules will be punished and never achieve sustained happiness.

Ken Kesey proves that societal norms were established for a valid reason. From these societal norms, rules arise and are required by law to be followed. Both of which Kesey believes are necessary for order. A society cannot exist without foundation of norms or any rules. Chaos would erupt and no person will be happy or satisfied. Kesey states that in order to maintain a healthy self-sufficient society, rules and norms are necessary. He also presents the idea that those who oppose this ideology will either perish or suffer from societies’ punishments.